

Nursing Assistants: A Hidden Work Force

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Abstract

The ongoing nursing shortage and an increased demand for nursing care, require both new and retooled delivery systems. The importance of teams delivering care and all team members working at the top of license or skill set are well established concepts. Across the continuum from home to acute care, the need to better understand and utilize the skills of the hidden workforce of nursing assistants has never been greater. The purpose of this manuscript is to explore the resource and potential of career nursing assistants and to provide recommendations for recruitment, recognition, and retainment of these important team members.

Situation

The importance of the nursing assistants as a health care team member is widely accepted. Nursing Assistants (NA) provide as much as 90% of direct and functional care to patients across the health care continuum [1]. The COVID-19 Pandemic emphasized the importance of the role in providing hands on care and assisting licensed healthcare providers. In 2020, nursing home workers had one of the deadliest jobs and NA were identified as especially at risk [2]. A different approach is needed to create a work environment that supports career-focused nursing assistants to be engaged and successful.

Background

The beginnings of NA can be traced to WWI when the American Red Cross trained women volunteers to assist nurses caring for injured soldiers [3]. Concerns about the quality and standards of care provided, especially in nursing homes, led the passage of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act (OBRA) in 1987 [4]. It set the minimum federal standards for NAs training and education to become certified (Certified Nursing Assistants (CNA)). Despite inconsistent educational preparation, no formal licensure and a variety of titles, the nursing assistant role has persisted across the healthcare spectrum for over 100 years.

The NA role can be stratified into two categories: 1) individuals who complete the nursing assistant course but do not plan to stay in the role such as students choosing to work in the role during nursing school or 2) individuals that remain in the role as a career

choice. The latter have purposely chosen the role for the ‘work itself’ and the ‘patients they serve.’ However, they often suffer from lack of support, understaffing, unrealistic or inconsistent workloads/expectations, insufficient pay, and little input regarding the work environment and patient care planning. These factors lead to high turnover.

Assessment

In an era of increasing nursing and healthcare personnel shortages, high functioning healthcare teams working at the top of each worker’s ability and training are important. True teamwork within a health care environment that values open communication between managers, employees, and coworkers is critical for success.

Many NA cherish the personal, professional relationships they build with patients, residents and staff and become the eyes and ears for the clinical staff in the recognition of changes in condition. Lack of respect, limited resources, poor pay, and a shortage of advancement opportunities may be added burdens to an already mentally and physically challenging role.

Many organizations lack resources needed to enhance the engagement and opportunities for NA. NA need the same things that all caregivers desire – pride in the care they provide, a voice in the work environment, respect for their decision to pursue and stay in the role, a living wage and an opportunity to advance without leaving direct, hands-on care.

Recommendation

Certified Nursing Assistances have come a long way since WWI, but there are still advancements to be made. The projected growth from the Bureau of Labor Statistics on NA and Orderlies is 8% from 2019 to 2029 [5] which is much faster than the average growth for all occupations. Growing demand equals job security and the potential to shift perception of the role from a job to a lifelong career choice.

The Gallup Q12 (Rath, 2007) is widely recognized as a leading employee engagement assessment, The Gallup Q12 aligns with three main areas of the desired nursing assistant work environment - value, support, and voice, nursing assistants will be able to assist with defining and implementing a different methodology for recruitment, support, development, and recognition [6]. The following uses the 12 evidence-based questions as a framework for recommendations to enhance recruitment and retention of NA.

Q1 – I know what is expected of me at work.

Making sure that job descriptions are current and accurate, reflecting realistic expectations that are reviewed at least quarterly.

Q2- I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.

Having sufficient and operative equipment to facilitate a safe environment for both the NA and patient/resident.

Q3 – At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.

Providing time and resources for NA to provide patient care and to nurture the relationships that are so important for their success.

Q4 – In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.

Refining end of shift huddles and staff handoffs to provide real-time acknowledgement and support. Striving for real time immediate feedback to help reinforce behaviors.

Q5 – My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.

Rounding regularly to better assess environment barriers and strengths as well as success of staffing patterns on meeting staff and patient needs. Mentors and peer partners provide individual support and caring to NA on every shift.

Q6 – There is someone at work who encourages my development.

Providing periodic assessments of role performance and mutual goal setting that align needs with NA strengths.

Q7 – At work, my opinions seem to count.

Routinely seeking and listening to NA input as well as including NA as voting members in meetings, committees and councils tasked with making decisions that affect the NA role.

Q8 – The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.

Helping the NA to visualize and verbalize how the work that they do and the overall mission and vision of the company with empha-

sis on patient safety goals.

Q9 – My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.

Assisting with the development of skills to enhance team functioning including communication and giving and receiving feedback is important. Providing opportunities for mentors and peer partners to regular support.

Q10 – I have a best friend at work.

Recognizing the importance of peer relationships by providing/encouraging appropriate social time at work and fostering trust among team members and residents/patients.

Q11 – In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.

Ongoing evaluations of measurable goals on a quarterly basis. Recognizing and rewarding both longevity (time in the role) and loyalty (time at the facility).

Q12 – This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.

Encouraging mentoring that allows NA to share knowledge with peers and new hires helping to educate the team and enhance individual confidence and credibility.

Summary

The NA workforce is a hidden commodity and a frequently undervalued treasure. This SBAR has outlined challenges with recruitment and retention and then utilized the Gallup Q12 to provide suggestions for addressing engagement of these important workers.

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